



**SPRIT OF BELARUS**

The Sacred World Beyond a Needle Eye

# **BELARUSAN NIZANKA**

*Step-By-Step*

*Tutorial*

*Basic*

**by Iryna Varabei**



**Take a journey and learn about Belarusian spirituality while immersing yourself in Belarusian folk wisdom.**

According to Belarusian beliefs, when you feel a need to commune with God there are three ways to ensure your prayers are heard. First, you can go to church and pray. You can also light a candle and pray. Lastly, you can embroider while meditating on your prayer, for doing embroidery is communicating with God.

Belarusians have preserved ancient Aryan symbolic scripts by transforming them into ornamental stitchery. For generations they have passed on the traditions, symbols and wisdom of their grandmothers. They still believe the adage, "While your hands are stitching, your heart communes with God. Stitched symbols are a way to communicate with the spiritual realm."



Iryna Varabei came to Canada in 1999, when she was 40, bringing her old dream along. She had desired just to stitch (meant that back home, she had no opportunities to...).

In 2005, she joined the Toronto Guild of Stitchery. Now, she is happy to offer to Canadian stitchers her own designs. All of them are based on Belarusian traditional ornamental motifs or on Belarusian images. Iryna tries to transform the traditional patterns into modern designs enriched with diversity of stitching techniques. "I work in different techniques, with different colours, but I still think Belarusian", she says.

In a country rich from the stitching traditions of many nations, needleworkers can now try their needles at stitching a piece inspired by the traditions of Belarusian needlework and to include it in the mosaic of Canadian stitching styles. Iryna Varabei's work has been regularly published in A Needle Pulling Thread magazine and displayed at the Creative Festival in Toronto

**SPIRIT OF BELARUS**  
THE WORLD BEYOND A NEEDLE EYE

**Belarusian Motifs Collection**  
**Counted Stitch Patterns**  
designed and worked by Iryna Varabei

Canadian stitching designer, Iryna is thrilled to introduce her many charming needlework designs! Based on traditional Belarusian motifs and images, Iryna transforms traditional patterns into modern designs rich with a fascinating variety of needlework stitches and techniques. Explore the many stitching varieties that are now part of the North American stitching mosaic. Try your needle at these patterns today!

**'Nizanka'**  
Cross Stitch, Canvaswork, Needlepoint, Open-work for the beginners and advanced and more... on the

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## Belarusan Nizanka

(Wicker Stitch)

**As unique as beautiful, as well as easy and intricate to do**

To date, my designing work consisted in transforming Belarusan traditional patterns into modern stitching techniques and stiles. But I have often been asked if there is a specific, distinctive type of Belarusan stitching technique. Today, I am ready to say, "Yes, it exists", and to introduce it via my designing, bringing it up for Canadian stitchers. And hence, here is my pleasure to offer this detailed tutorial for beginners.

Nizanka is the most ancient technique known in Belarus. It was used for making the ritual items such as 'roushniks' (towels) which played an important role in the old pagan Belarusan customs.

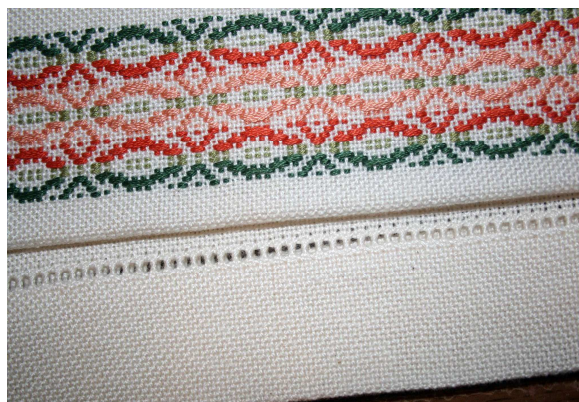
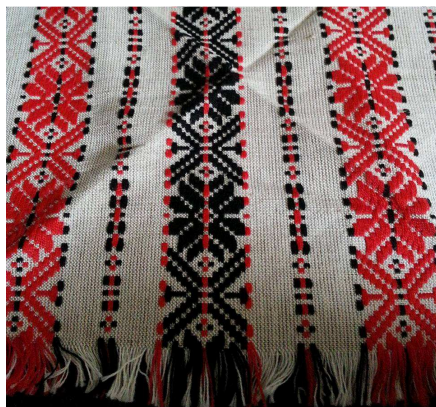
The reasons of using specifically this technique are:

1. It is **reversible** - shows meaningful symbols on both sides of the stitched piece.
2. There are **no knots**. Knots were considered as an obstruction for the Good power, so ritual and sacred items had to have not a single knot.
3. It's **easy and fast** to do (and requires no finishing).

Nizanka is still widely spread in Belarus; it is used for decorating traditional towels, garments and linens. Especially in recent years, when Belarusan people are experiencing ethnic boom Nizanka becomes popular and fashionable.

The name 'Nizanka'\* (can be translated as 'wicker stitch') comes from working method of "za-niza-ti", which means "to wicker into".

\*Besides Nizanka (нізанка), there are few other names for this technique in Belarusan language: *Prociahe* (процяг), *Naciahe* (нацяг), *Nabor* (набор) and others.





Nizanka stitches carry out geometrical patterns in a specific method giving them that unique 'Belarusish' look. Traditionally, there are two color work options used: red and white, or light grey and white (natural flax colors); occasionally 2 or 3 rows are done in black.

These patterns are widely used for making such important in traditional costume garment as belts. Nizanka method can also carry out geometrical patterns in that specific, 'optical-effect' look. It reminds the old coverlet weaving, and actually, the same patterns are used in weaving, as well. And thus, they can be mixed or transferred from one technique to another.



#### Advantages of Nizanka technique:

- The main advantage is that it has an equally good reverse side, if not the same.
- It is fast and easy.
- No specific finishing is required.
- No hiding ends of threads is necessary. They can be left loose and then used for fringed or tasselled finishing with the ripen fabric threads along.
- No hoop is necessary.

#### Fabrics and threads

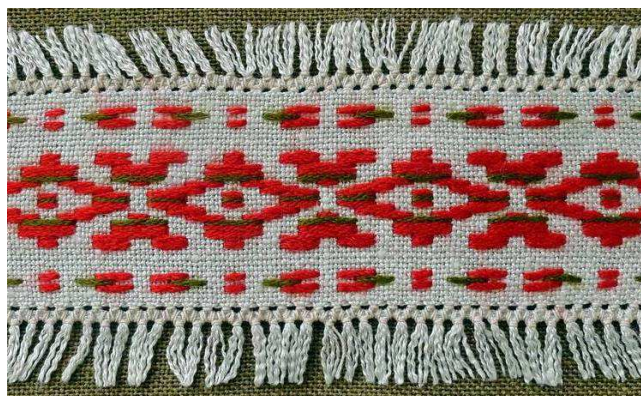
Though, as I am still in process of exploring of the possibilities of Nizanka technique, I have to confess, that the materials for my designs were chosen quite spontaneously. So, neither materials types nor colors are the ultimate solution for this kind of stitching. I presume and even expect you to make changer in proposed materials. I will be glad to hear from someone who has experimented with another materials and colors, and methods of finishing, as well.

Though, I have to remind that thickness of stitching thread has to fit fabric mesh.

Just one note about stitching on Aida fabric: Aida is quite fine for Nizanka. The only point is to consider each block in Aida weaving as one fabric thread.



#### Let's start.



The visual effect of *Nizanka* is similar to that of Satin stitch, but it differs in its stitching technique. While Satin stitch concentrates on each motif or pattern at a time, *Nizanka* involves carrying the thread for the entire width or length of the design at a time. The patterns are created by using rows of straight **running stitches** of long and short length. Each row can be repeated 2 to 6 times. The stitches are done row by row.

The little lesson will make this point clear.



## Lesson 1. Running Stitch

Try to stitch this small sample, and point of the whole method will get more comprehensible.



The stitching method for this piece is to take each row at a time and to start each new row with a new thread.

### **Please note:**

- If you prefer to have both sides of your work show up as a front/face side, it is best to use the 'stab' method instead of the darning stitch. Pull each stitch through the fabric completely, otherwise the working thread won't be clearly seen at the other side.
- The length of the thread should be determined before a row of the pattern is started. A good guide to use is 2 times the length of the row. Once the row has been worked, you may adjust subsequent lengths of threads for next rows.

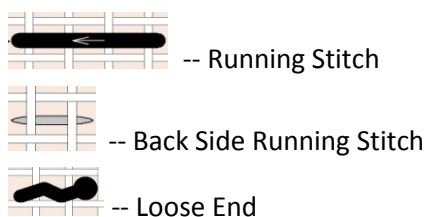
### **See Chart 1.a.**

#### Materials proposed for the trial

18 ct even woven fabric white or any light color  
DMC pearl #5 red or any dark color

#### **Symbol Key for Chart 1.a:**

Each **white line** on the chart equals one fabric thread.



For designs like this one, I suggest to start stitching from the central row.



Chart 1.a

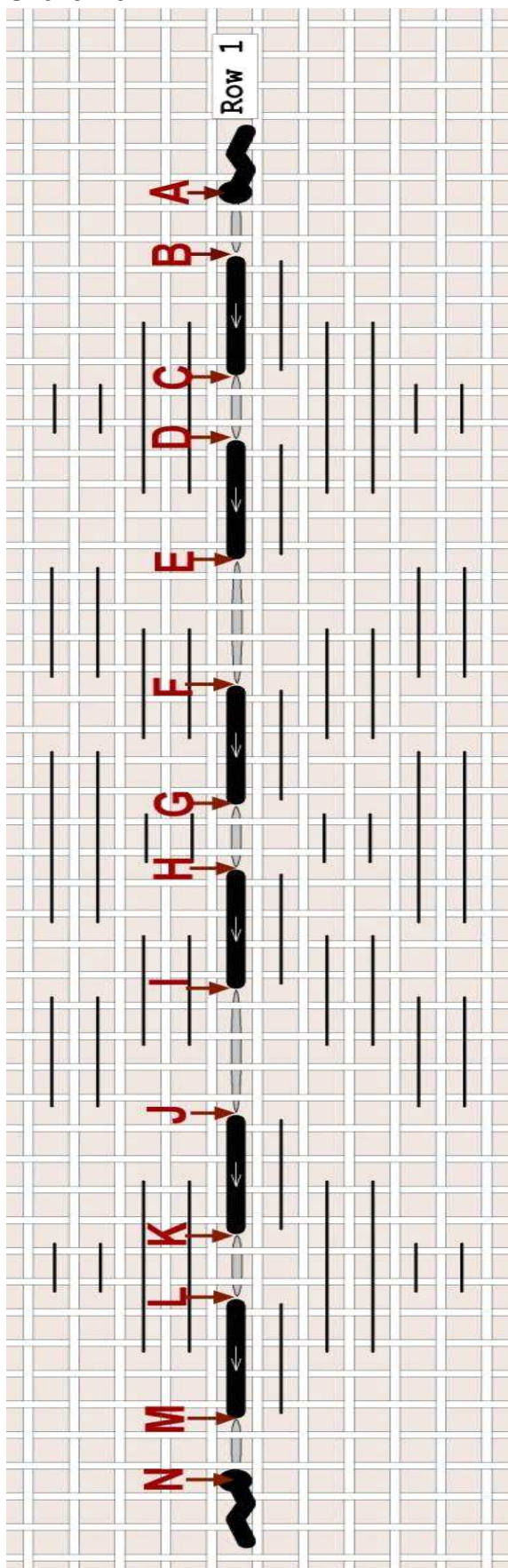
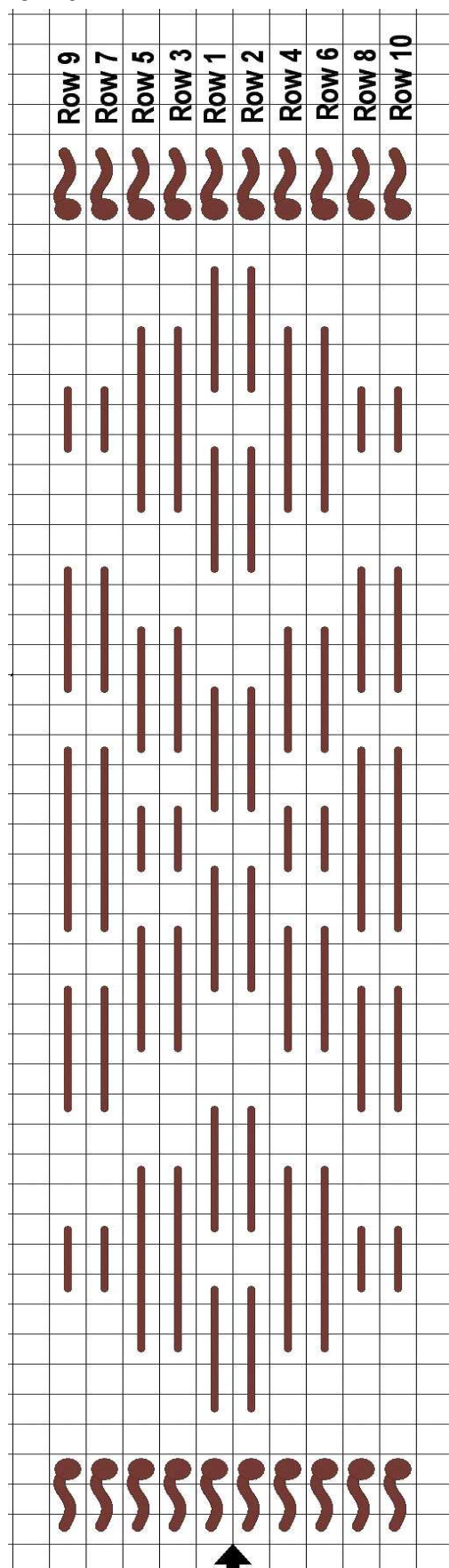


Chart 1.b

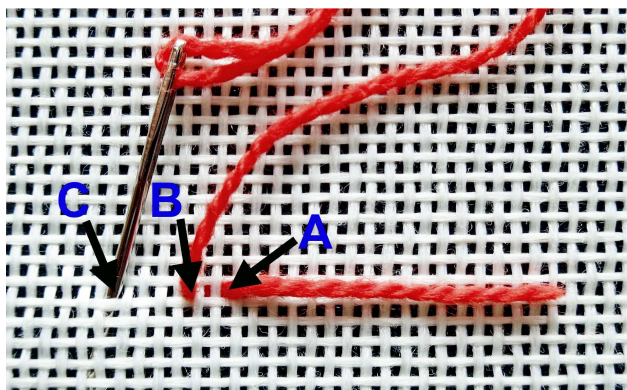




Let's start with **Row 1** which is in the center of the design.

1. Take a thread, measure its length approximately for the length of whole design and cut it. For this, you can count the fabric threads, and then take some more 3-4 inches for the loose ends and to work freely with the needle. After completing the first row, you can adjust the thread length for the next rows.

2. Thread your needle and work with the Running stitch the **Row 1** from right to left. For this, put the thread down at **Point A**. Don't fix the end of your thread, instead of it, pull the thread down and leave the end of the thread on the fabric. See the picture below (Points **A**, **B** and **C** correspond to the **same Points** on **Chart 1.a**) :



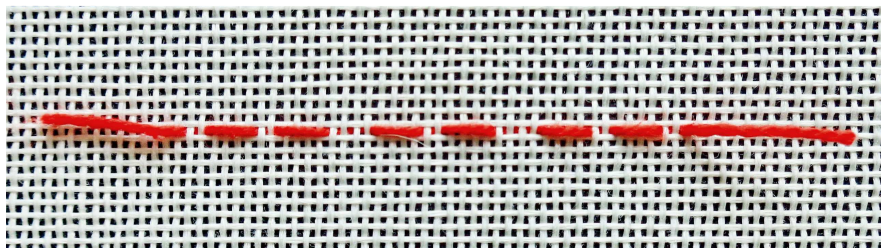
3. Count 2 (two) fabric threads and come up at **Point B**. Count 4 (four) fabric threads to the left and go down at **Point C**. Work the whole row to the left following **Chart 1**.

At **Point N** which matches the symbol  the thread should be up.

4. Unthread your needle and leave the thread free.

Don't secure the thread not at the beginning, nor at the end of the row, just leave the ends loose.

Your first row is completed. It should look like on the photo below. (The ends of your thread may be longer).



See **Chart 1.b**.

### Symbol Key for Chart 1.b:

Each **black line** on the chart equals one fabric thread.



Take a second thread and work the **Row 2** from right to left in the same manner following **Chart 1.b**.

Note: **Row 2** repeats (or look the same as) **Row 1**.

And then, go so on; work each row with a new thread.

Your first lesson/sampler is completed.

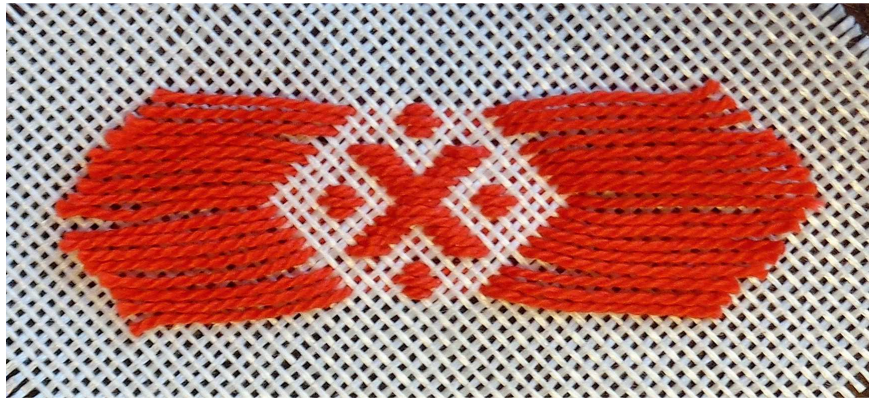


## Lesson 2.

### Diagonal Running Stitch

Diagonal Running Stitch is done with the same method as Straight Running Stitch – row by row with a new thread. The only difference is it is done in diagonal direction of the fabric. See the **Chart 1.d.** and the pictures below.

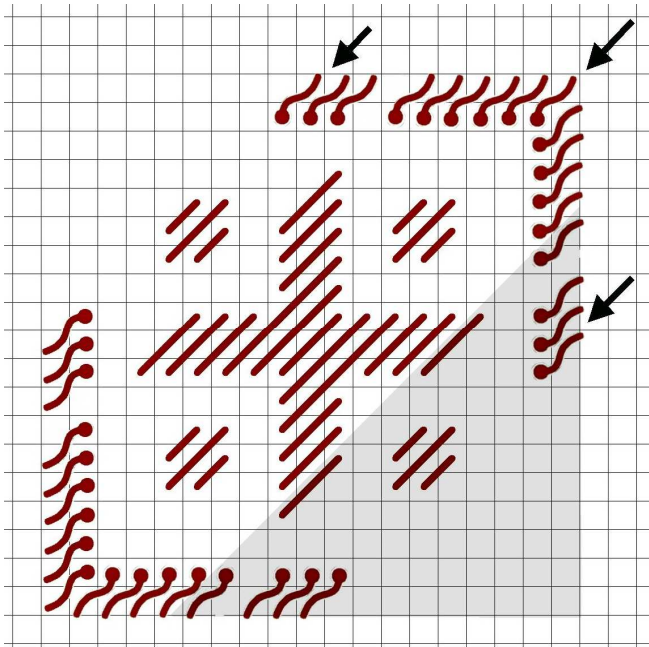
*The examples of Diagonal Running Stitch method in my designs can be seen in Gallery at the end of the brochure; designs – Talismans For Babies, Radavik Talisman.*



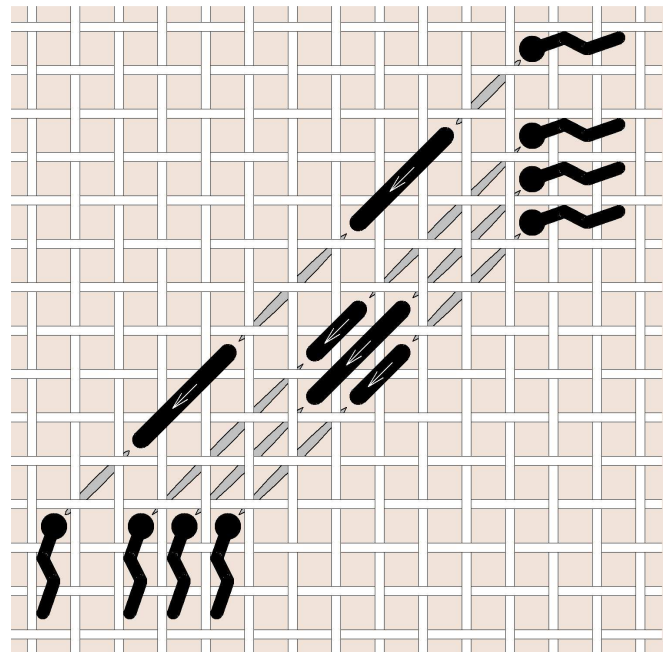
**Chart 1.c** corresponds to the darkened area in **Chart 1.d.**

The black arrows on **Chart 1.d** show the direction of the stitched rows.

**Chart 1.d.**



**Chart 1.c**





## Lesson 3.

### Loop-On-Edge

Loop-on-Edge method is used when you don't want to have neither fringes nor tassels at one of the sides of your piece. Or it can be used in more complicated and intricate designs.

*The examples of Loop-on-Edge method in my designs can be seen in Gallery at the end of the brochure; designs – Talismans For Babies, Radavik Talisman, Traveń Table Runner.*

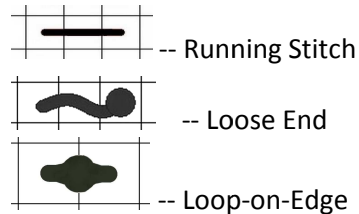
**Note:** for Loop-on-Edge method, threads should be two times thinner, because two threads will be used for stitching.

Let's try Loop-on-Edge method stitching the similar little design.

#### See Chart 2.a.

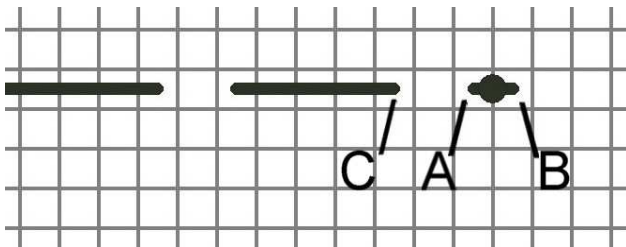
#### Symbol Key for Charts 2.a and Chart 2.b:

Each **black line** on the chart equals one fabric thread.



Start your first row at the Loop-on-Edge Symbol securing the thread using the Loop-On-Edge method following **Chart 2.a** which corresponds to the darkened area on **Chart 2.b**.

#### **Chart 2.a**

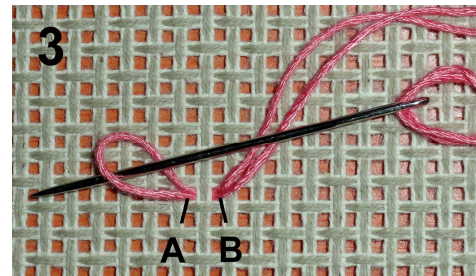
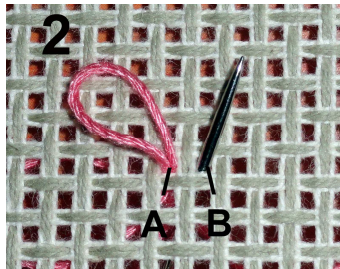
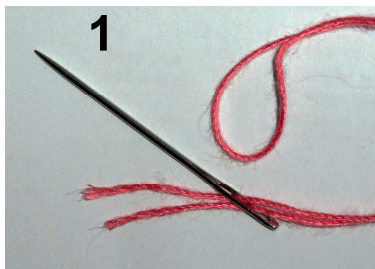


1. Take the thread 2X longer than required for one row.

2. Fold the thread. Thread the needle with the doubled thread as it shown on **Photo 1**.

See **Photos 1 through 6** to make the Loop-On-Edge Stitch. The letters **A B C** in pictures correspond to the same letters in **Chart 2.a**.

3. At the point **C** get the thread up and follow **Chart 2.b** to complete your first row, and then, the whole piece.





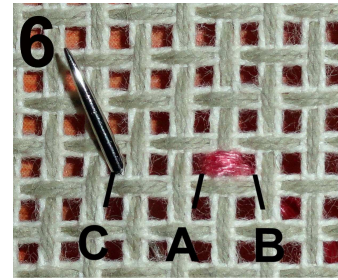
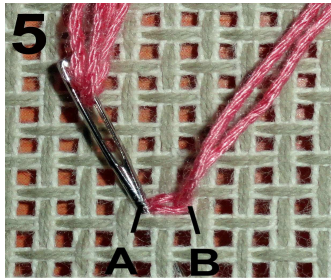
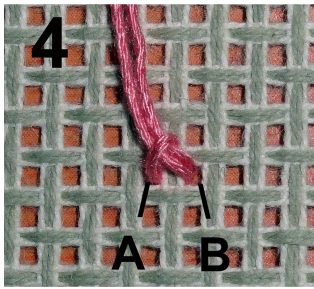
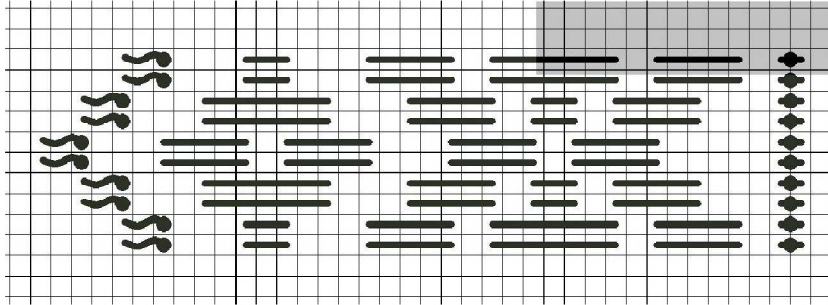
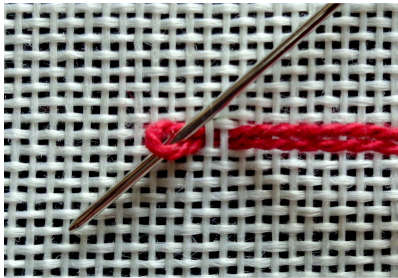


Chart 2.b

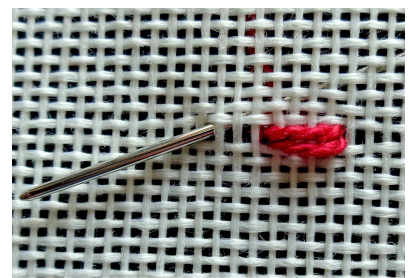


Loop-on-Edge stitch can be done on any number of fabric threads:

...two:



... four:



After your stitching is completed you can tie the loose ends, so you will get such a nice little piece with a tassel like this ones on the photos below ☺ :

Note: Don't forget to measure the threads long enough for making a tassel before stitching.



(this one was done on a ribbon)



After a nice, beautiful running stitching is completed it requires a kind of finishing (unless it wasn't stitched on a ribbon). There can be several ways of it. You can figure out your own and create something original. I will show you some of them I know.

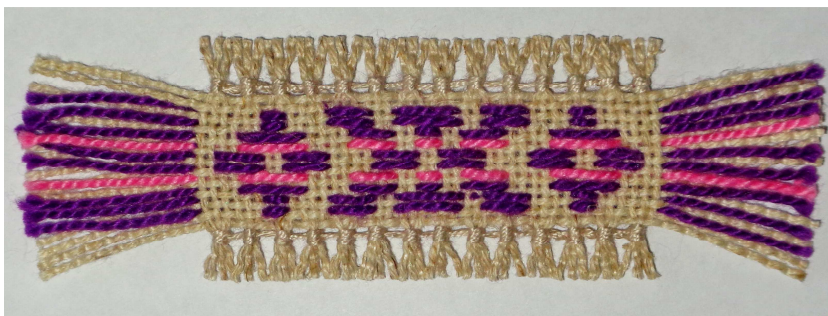
## Lesson 4

### Sheaf Stitch Hemming

Of the piece you have done as a sample of our Lesson 1, can be made a cute miniature bookmark like this one on the photo below.

*This method was used for designs – Bookmarks, Traveń Table Runner, Christmas Snowflakes ornaments and all Talismans (see GGallery at the back of the brochure).*

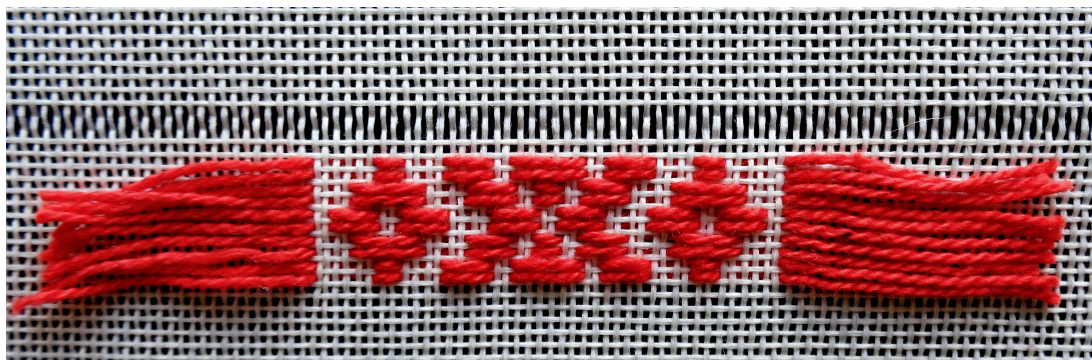
(note the color variation... :)



**Sheaf Stitch** is done at the top and bottom sides of the bookmark.

Let's start.

1. Take your piece completed at **Lesson 1**.
2. Remove (draw) two threads along the stitched rows as it shown in the picture below:



3. Make Sheaf Stitch following **Chart 3.a**

**Chart 3.a** corresponds to the darken area on **Chart 3.b** and **Picture 3.ph**

#### See Chart 3.a.

Threads proposed for Sheaf Stitch – DMC Broder #30-35

**Note:** You can use Loop-On-Edge method for the first 'Sheaf'.

The knots of Sheaf stitches should be done firmly, with strong tension.

For better result, I suggest making a doubled knot on one 'Sheaf'.



Chart 3.a

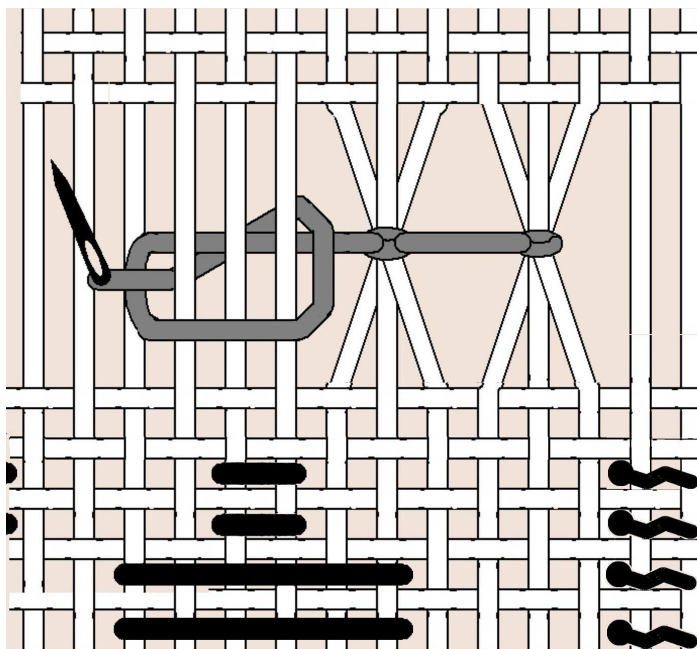
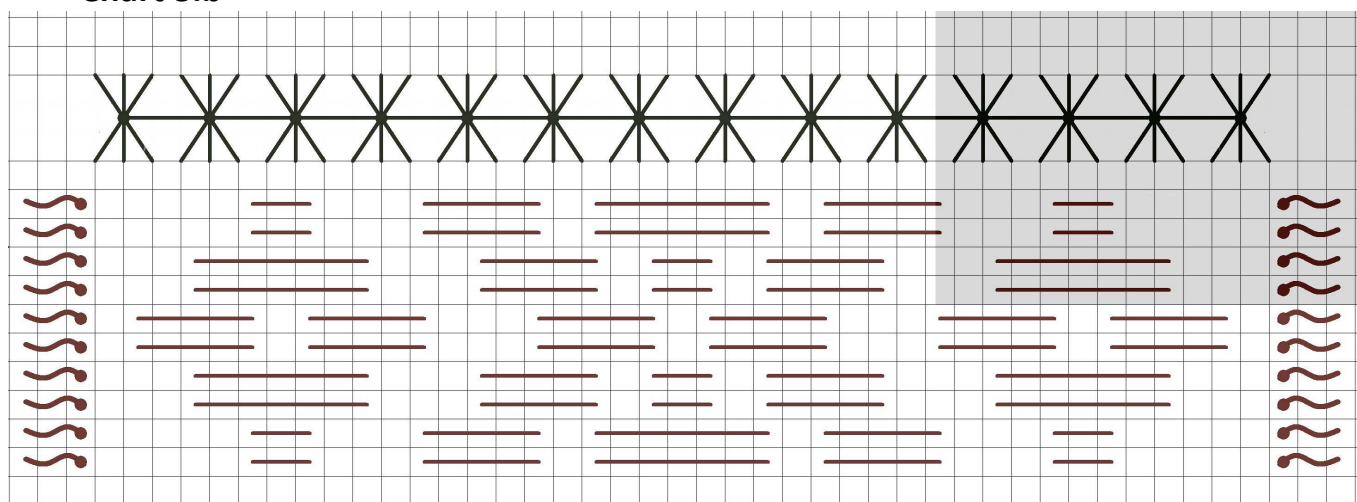
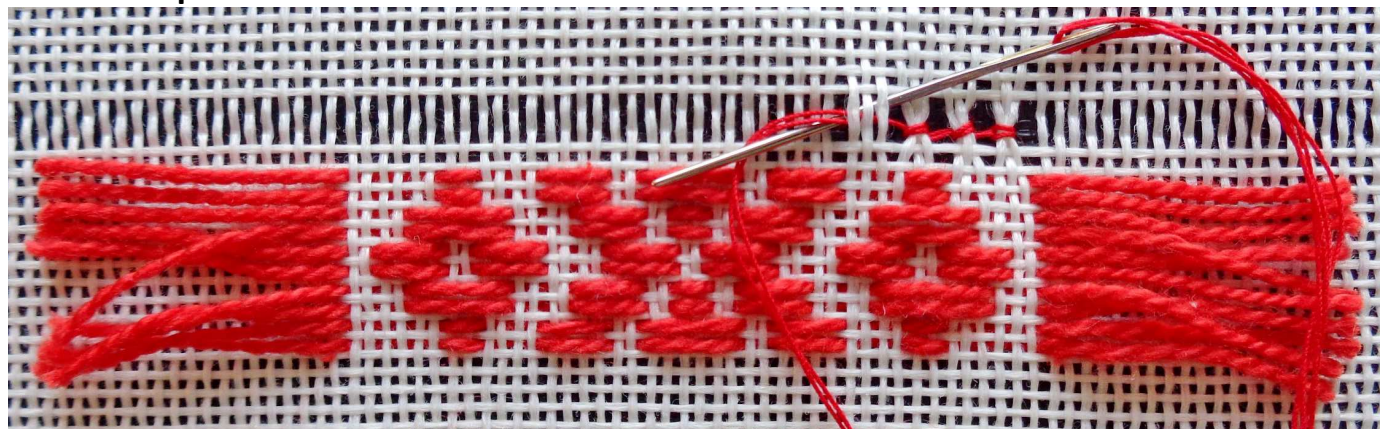


Chart 3.b

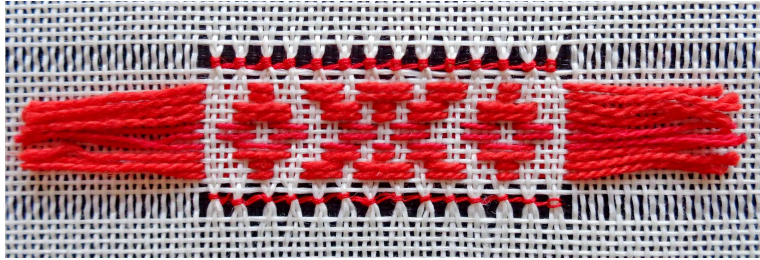


Picture 3.ph

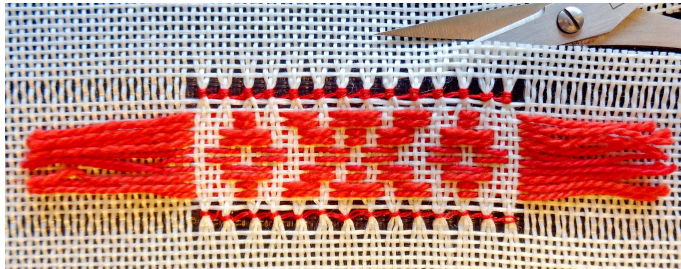




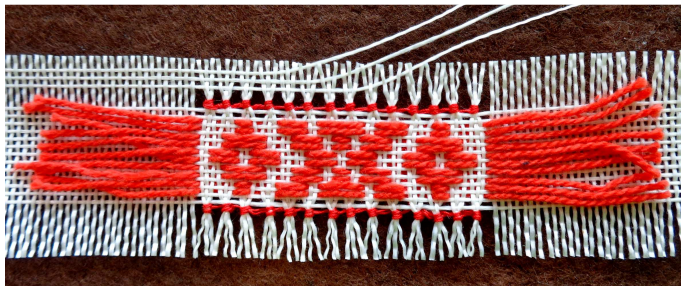
4. Finish the top and bottom of the piece with Sheaf Stitch along stitched rows from the right to the left as it shown in the picture below (at the top are the doubled knots):



5. Cut the fabric at the top and bottom to the length you like:



6. Remove the fabric threads the way it shown in the picture below:



7. Cut the fabric and stitching threads along to the length you like at the right and left sides of the piece:



9. Remove the fabric threads:





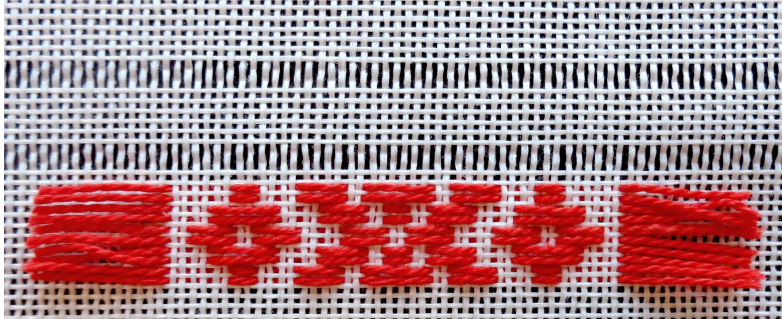
## Lesson 5

### Folded Sheaf-Stitch Hemming

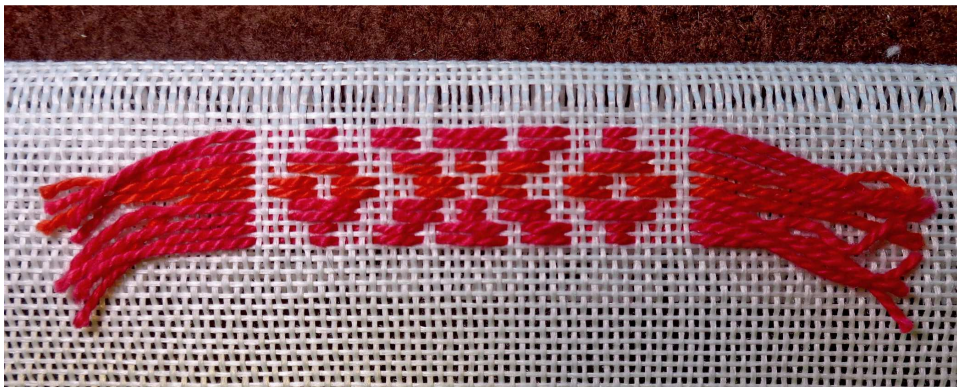
Folded Sheaf-Stitch Hemming is a little more complicated but looks a bit neater.

*For the example, see my Sky Cross Talisman design in the Gallery at the end of the brochure.*

1. Take your sample piece completed at **Lesson 1**.
2. Remove (draw) two threads along the stitched rows. Count some fabric threads up (in my picture, it is six threads) and remove two more threads as it shown in the picture below. You got two rows of drawn threads:



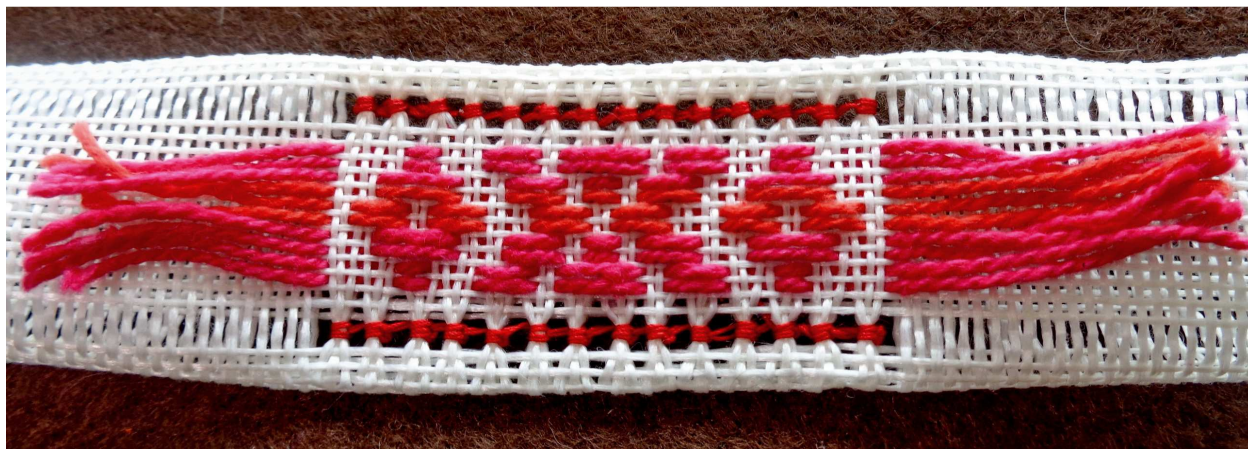
3. Fold the edge of the fabric the way two drawn threads rows join into one row (applied on each other):



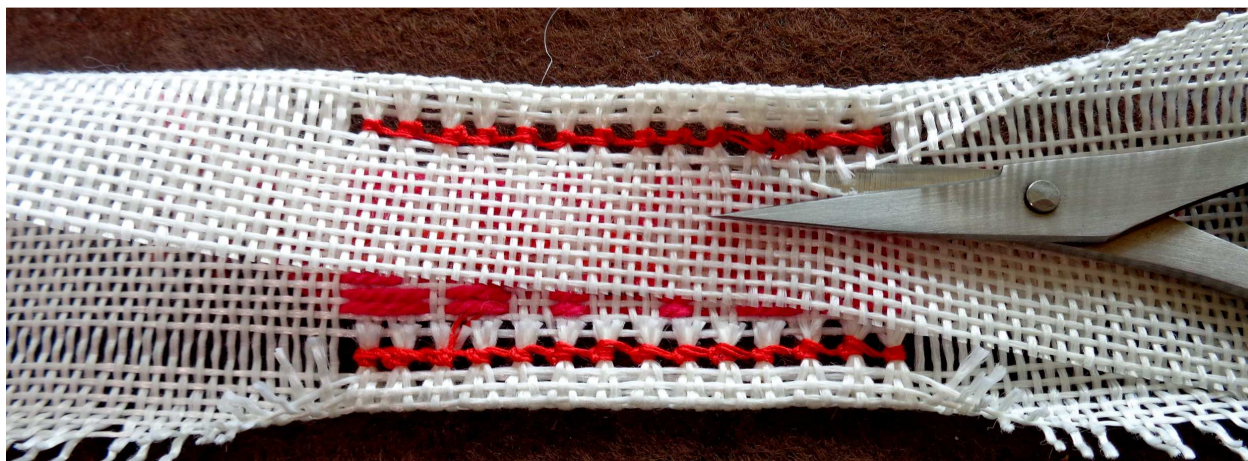
4. Make Sheaf Stitch from right to left along rows of running stitches. For making a 'sheaf', take three threads of the face side and three threads of the folded edge together. So, Sheaf Stitch is done by making a knot on six fabric threads in sum:







5. Turn the piece over. Cut the edges of the fabric to needed length so as the edges don't cover the stitched pattern. Then, remove spare fabric threads:

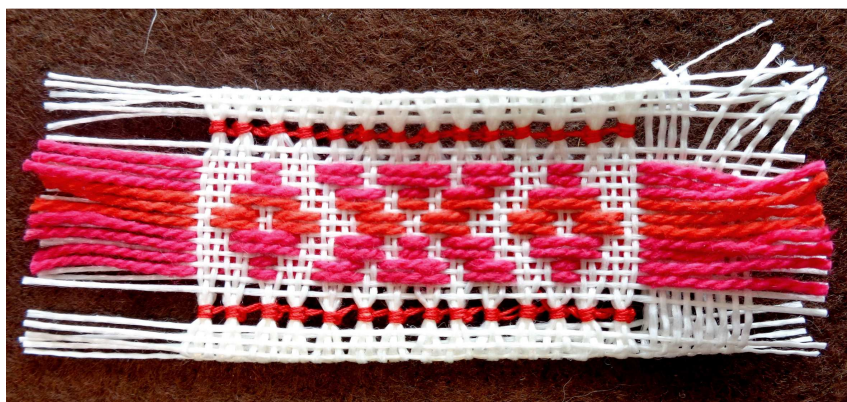




6. Cut the edges of the fabric at the right and left side of the piece along with the loose threads of the stitched rows to the desired length:



7. Remove fabric threads:

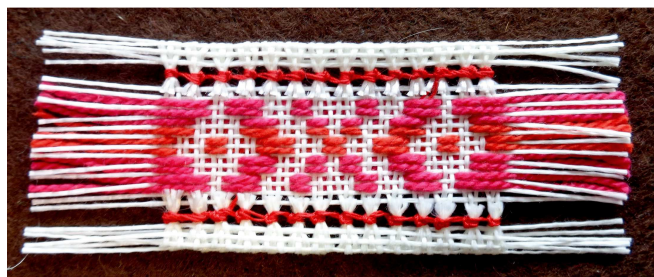


Your finished piece should look like this one:

Face side



Back side



## Lesson 6

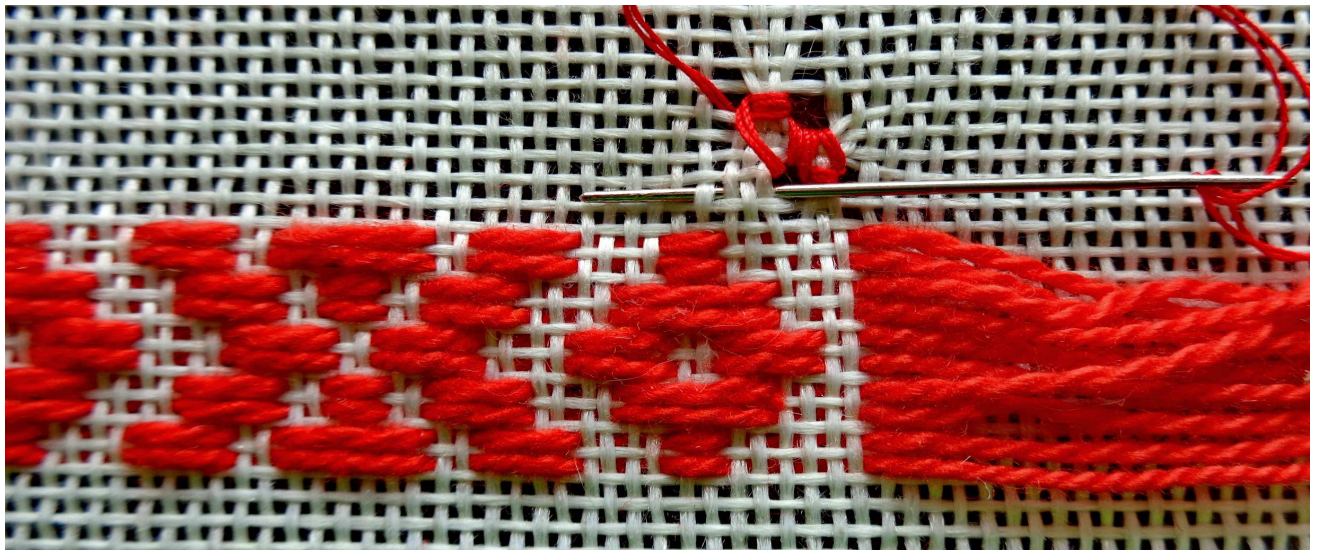
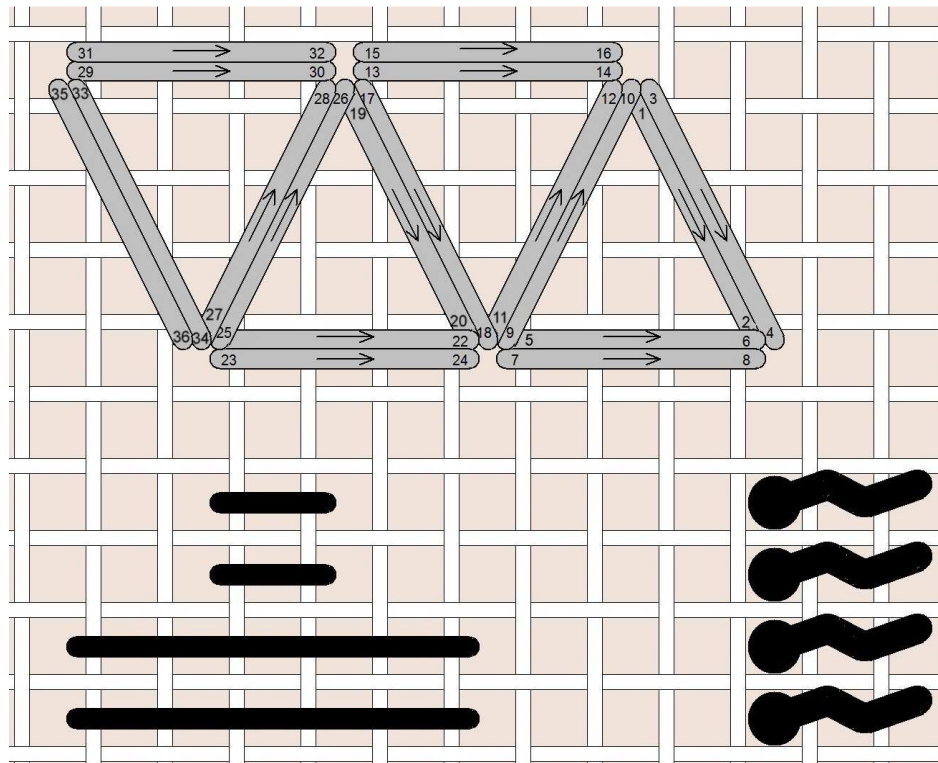
### Three-Sided Stitch Hemming

Four-sided Stitch is another way (but not the last one) used for hemming in Nizanka technique.  
*This method was used for my Easy Bookmark design (see Gallery at the back).*

Let's learn it on the sample piece stitched at the **Lesson 1**.

1. Take the piece you completed at the **Lesson 1**. See **Chart 5.a**.
2. Make Three-Sided Stitch at the up and bottom of the piece from the right to the left following **Chart 5.a** and the photos below:

**Chart 5.a**



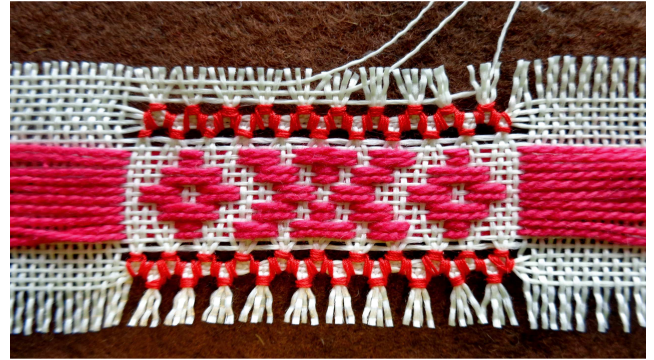




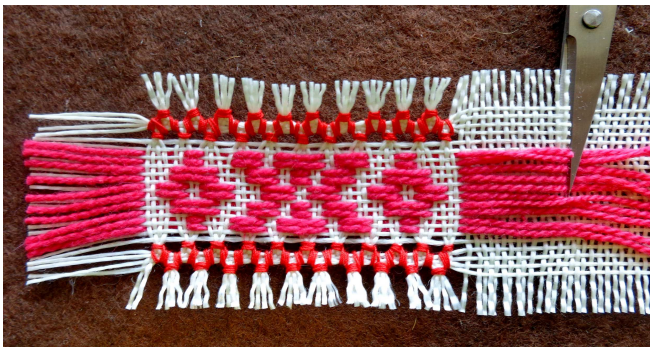
3. 5. Cut the fabric at the top and bottom to the length you like:



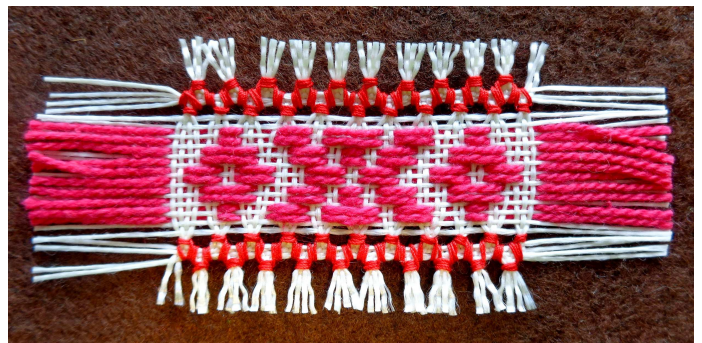
4. Remove the fabric threads the way it shown in the picture below:



5. Cut the fabric and stitching threads along to the length you like at the right and left sides of the piece and remove the fabric threads:



6. The finished piece will look like that:





## Lesson 7

### Loop-On-Edge Start Hemming

Loop-on-Edge method can make a good starting method with hemming along. It fits for hanging pieces, for instance.

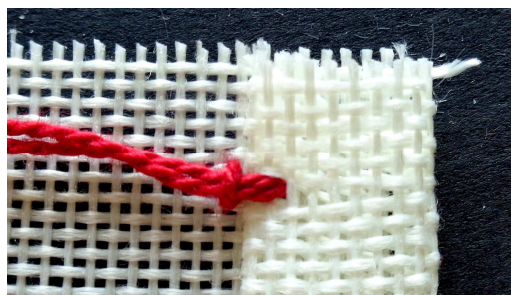
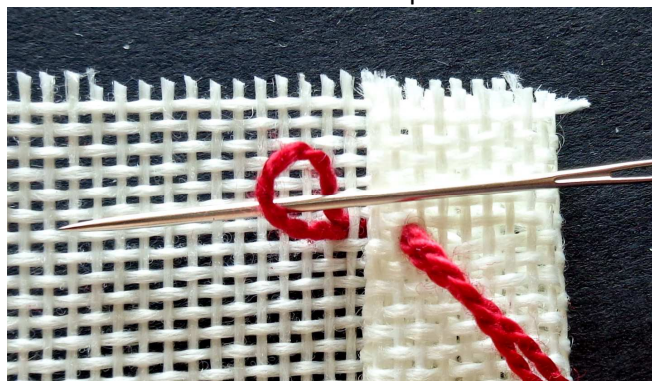
*This method was used for my Sky Cross Talisman design (see Gallery at the back)*



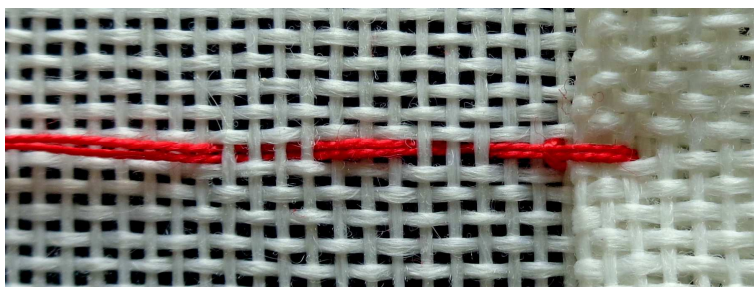
1. Fold the edge of your fabric two times the way it's shown in the picture:



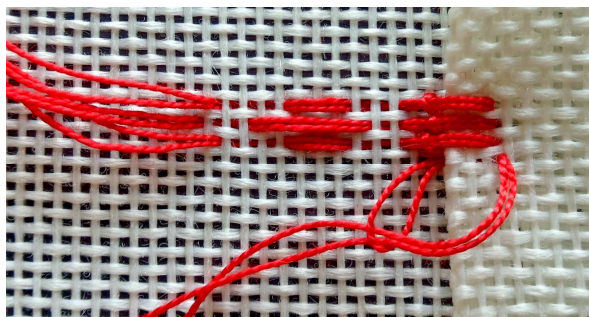
2. Make a Loop-On-Edge stitch on the folded edge of the fabric as it's shown in the pictures below:



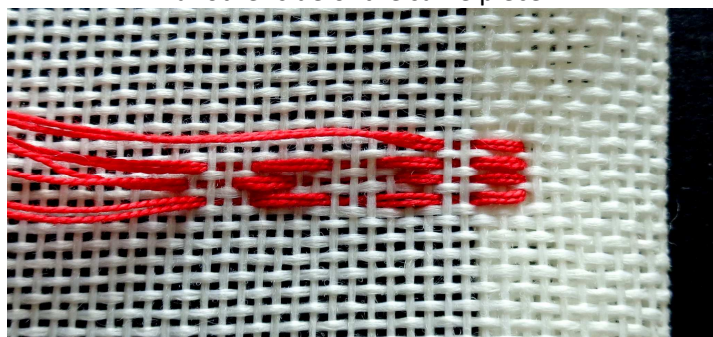
3. Stitch the first row of a pattern:



4. Stitch the next rows and a whole pattern in the same manner:  
(one side of the sample piece...:



another side of the same piece...:

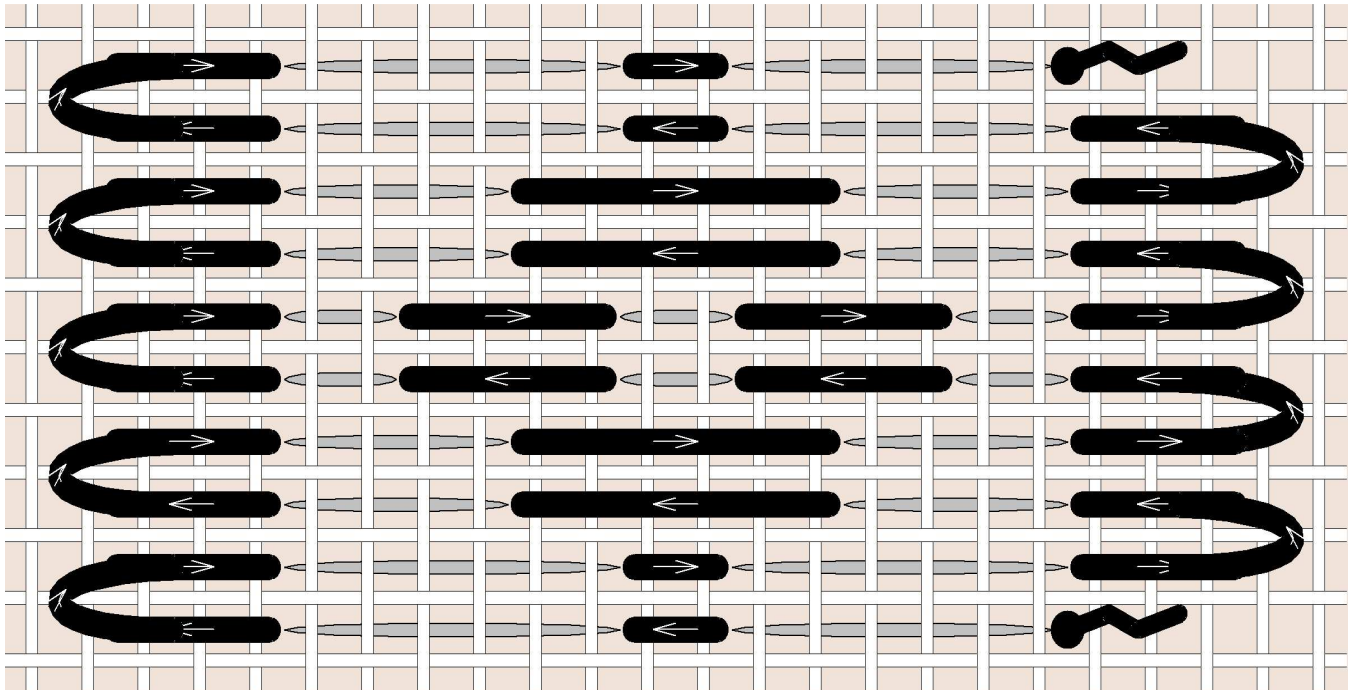
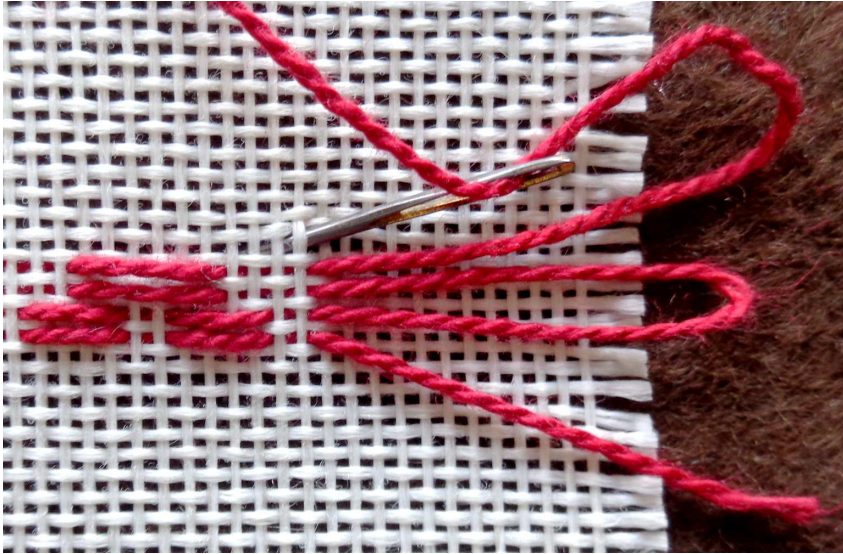




## Lesson 8.

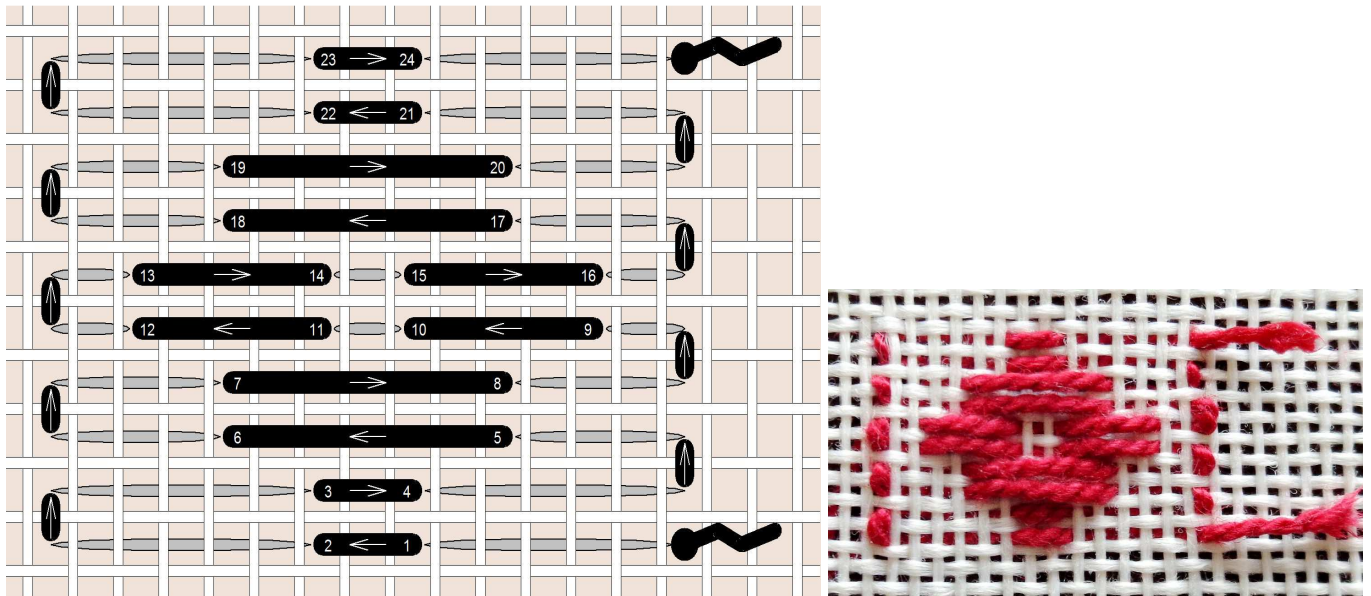
### Tips

1. For a good – firm, solid – effect, it is a good to stitch on a doubled fabric.
2. When stitching a small design (short rows) it is more convenient not to take a new thread for each row. You can take a long one, turn it at the end of each row, leave a loop on the fabric and stitch in opposite direction. See the picture and chart for a sample pattern below:

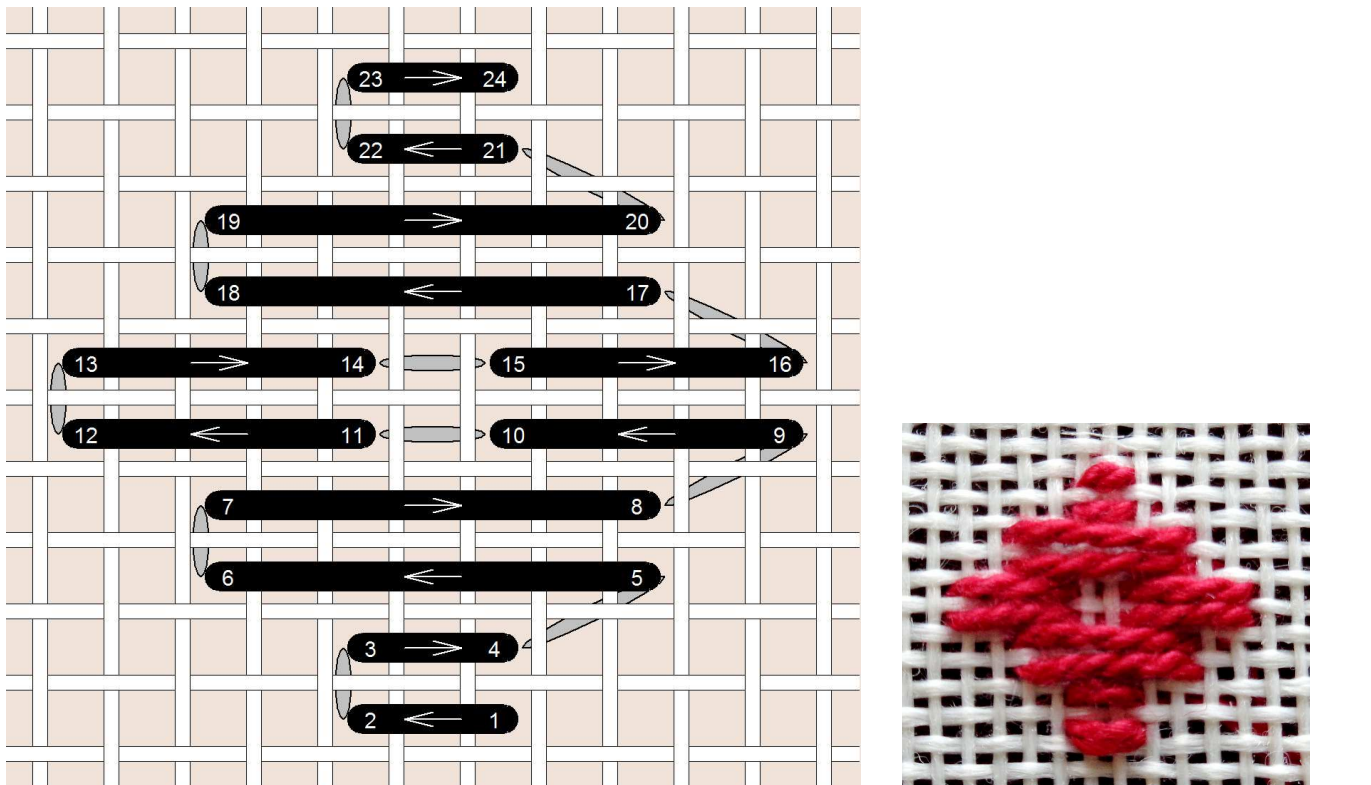


3. There is the stitching method when there can be no new-thread-for-each-row, no loose ends, no tassels and all that. It is possible to turn one long thread for each new row just at the back of the fabric.

See the pictures and charts for the sample pieces on the next page.

**Method 1:**

**Method 2.** The back side of the piece won't look that neat and nice, though. And the piece won't be both-sided if done in this way. And you should to fix a thread at the back side of the fabric.





## Lesson 9. Fringes and Tassels

Making fringes and tassels (fringes are miniature tassels ☺) is the easiest and fanny part of Nizanka work. You may do any hamming stitches before fringing or may not. There can be two rows of hemming work or more there. You may cut any length of the fabric and stitching threads for fringes as you like. Just note: don't forget to get enough fabric for future fringes before stitching.

Below you can see the examples of fringing in my works to get some ideas



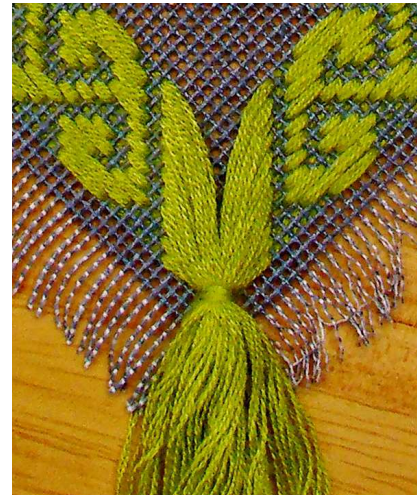
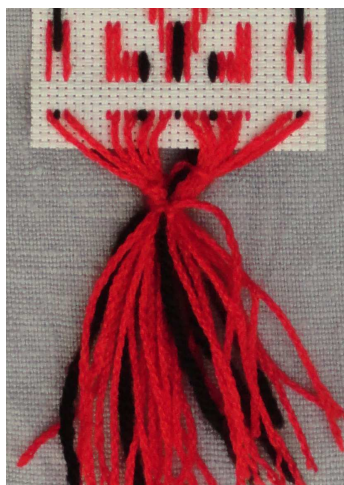
Tassels.

One of advantages of Belarusian Nizanka is making tassels directly of the threads that were used in stitching. And here it is your realm of your fantasy and creativity! I only can give some few ideas to sparkle your inspiration ☺.

Note: just think about them before stitching to know how much fabric will you need for tasselling.





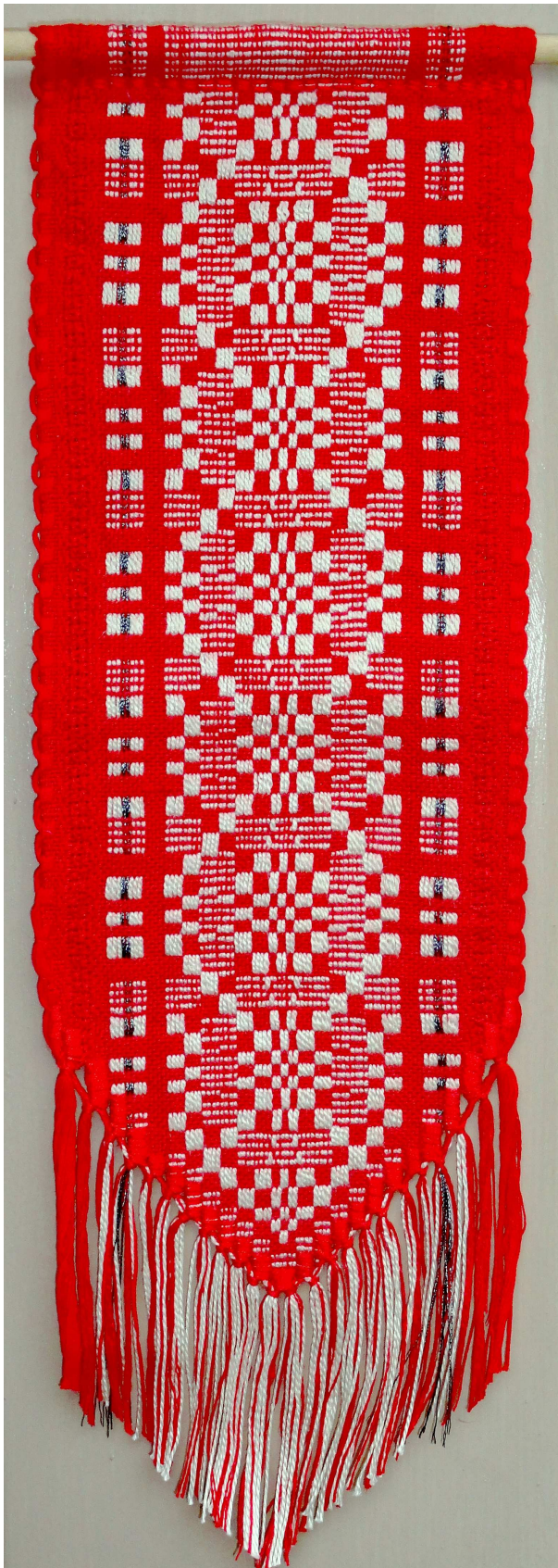




## Gallery

### **Belarusan Nizanka**

designed and stitched by Iryna Varabei



#### **Tricky Diamond hanging**

stitched on the ribbon.

Note, both sides of the piece are completely Identical.



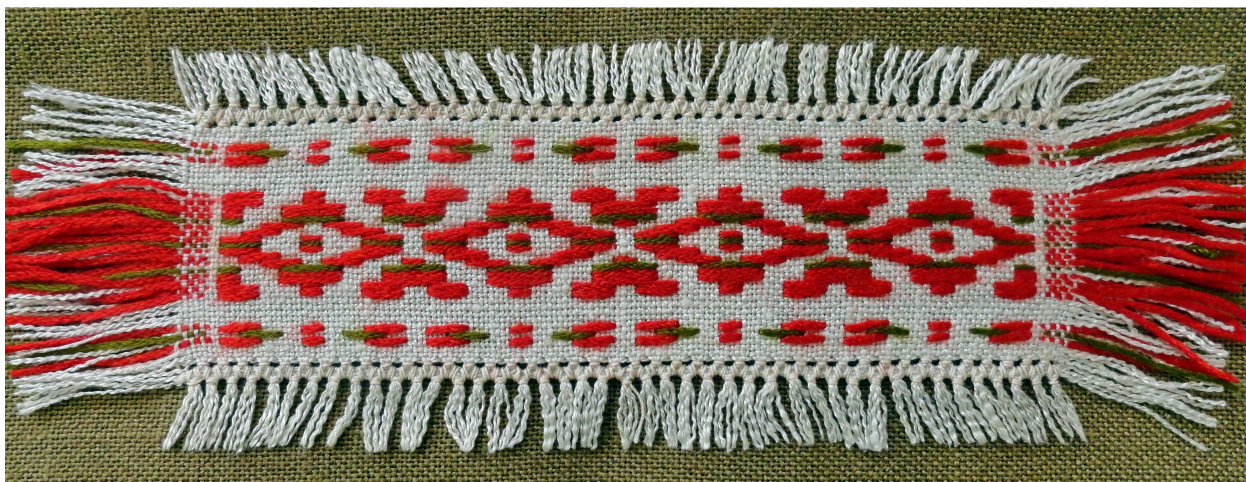




### Lucky Charm

both sides are not identical but still meaningful





Easy Bookmark



Lucky Charm





**Talismans for Babies**



**Talisman for a Baby Boy**



**Talisman for a Baby Girl**



**Talisman for a Baby Girl**





**'Radavik' Talisman**  
(in private collection)





**'Sky Cross' Talisman**  
(in private collection)





'Good Luck' Talisman



Snowflakes  
Christmas  
Ornaments







**'Traveń' Table Runner**





### **'December Mood' Table Runner**

Nizanka is combined with other techniques





### **'Torba' – Belarusian Bag**

Nizanka is combined with other techniques.

Sheaf Stitch is used for hemming, finishing and sewing parts together

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